

JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Images after 9/11

by Chuck Kleinhans

I was going to get coffee in the motel lobby in Ogden, Utah, when an agitated middle aged guy—maybe a salesman—said “a plane crashed into the World Trade Center!” The staff at the motel desk seemed oblivious to anything, but I turned the corner to the breakfast bar, And there was the image on the morning tv news: one of the towers with fire and smoke billowing out. Wow, what a disaster I thought. I got the coffee and headed back to the room thinking to catch the other networks’ coverage. Back in the room while doing that, up came the live image of the second plane hitting the second tower. This was no accident... After the towers fell, it seemed pointless to do anything else but get on the road. Pulling up to the gas station, a kind of wild looking guy, sunburned and pretty toked up on something, probably alcohol, was raving about, “this is the end, they’re coming”...sort of a cold war commie image, I thought, well, hey! it’s Utah.

As an event it was, to use the movie marketing term, High Concept... and low budget. That is, the idea and emotion conveyed by the image of planes slamming into the towers and the subsequent collapse was instantly communicated, and it didn’t cost much. To recycle the adman’s slogan, “more bang for the buck.”

I say this not to be cynical, but to point out that for someone like myself, who works professionally in media analysis, your first impulse is to analyze, or to override emotion and experience with analysis, with the kind of deconstruction of the image that halts any human connecting up with palpable people.

Driving to Chicago there were no images except at every gas and food stop with people gathered around the monitors. So the image glut came later for me. And the teaching quarter began with a certain subdued quality. You didn’t know what anyone in class might have personally experienced, what friends and

relatives had been killed, injured, or otherwise affected, or how they had been touched. Once I knew that my NYC relatives and friends were safe, (but all New Yorkers were affected one way or another), I could feel less anxious about the events, but still...for several weeks the images kept returning.

But it became, by the sheer amount of imagery, supplemented by the suddenly blossoming American flags (often displayed in the most careless and disrespectful way), a set of images unto itself. Finally, unless you had a personal connection to the deaths, the 9/11 events became images with declining signification.

Gradually they were supplanted by a series of related images: Osama Bin Laden, military preparations, and lots of images of “bad” or “angry” Arabs and/or Muslims paired with images of “good” ones, plus the rescue efforts, the lost or missing WTC employees, and especially the cops and firefighters and EMS people. Given the endless churn of short news cycles on cable news networks, that usually had no new news, and all the rest of the current problems with broadcast journalism, it wasn’t surprising to find Letterman/Leno finding a new (temporary) sobriety, but it was bizarre to find the President declaring we should go out and spend and vacation to prove capitalism (or was it democracy?) has not been defeated. AND to observe that rather than offering a political analysis of the causes and consequences, the Chief Executive idiotically declared we were locked in an epic struggle with EVIL.

Of course, short of Computer Generated Image special effects in 100 million dollar plus blockbuster films, it’s hard to really get across the image of EVIL since we’ve all been so well trained in the existing Hollywood model. As a performer, Bin Laden appears as a rather sorry character actor rather than a persona of Ultimate EVIL.

In the past century, numerous critics and social analysts remarked that the modern age no longer allows the Bible’s inexplicable world of Job or Joshua, nor classical or Renaissance tragedy (Oedipus, Antigone, or Hamlet or Phaedra). It is difficult for us today to invest a profound depth to images, however historically important, however terrible and sickening. Once in Paris, at the height of the DeGaulle era, on an anniversary of the liberation of Paris from the Nazi occupation, I watched a program of documentaries of the events. Teens in the audience snickered and laughed at the image of General DeGaulle--having themselves been overloaded with his legend--while veterans of the original

events were angry at the upstarts. High school students were reported laughing at moments of *Shindler's List*, not from overt hatred of Jews but from cinematic training by teen horror movie conventions.

We'd had our own training in imperial image experience of the Middle East, perhaps most memorably with the first Indiana Jones movie. At a key moment Indy (played by Harrison Ford before he became better known as lawyer, President, and military aide to the CIA) is challenged in a bazaar by a big guy dressed in flowing "Arab" garb who elaborately brandishes a huge curved sword before the epic combat begins. Indy pulls out a revolver and just plugs the guy, to an uproarious audience response. White guy gets brown guy; modern technology bests medieval weaponry, etc. etc.

The draining of meaning, of seriousness thought, in our all consuming image culture, is well noted. The media problem for the Bush administration is one of somehow giving EVIL a memorable image. During the Gulf War, much of this was focused on Saddam Hussein, now being brought back for a reprise in Gulf War 2. Back then, *Newsweek* actually ran a doctored image of the Iraqi leader on their cover which shortened the spread of his moustache so that he looked more like Hitler. T-shirts with his face as a target appeared, and derogatory jokes about "camel jockeys" appeared in the media and anti-Arab and anti-Muslim jokes and slurs were common, permissible.

But this time around, someone in the administration (perhaps because Cheney and Bush are experienced oilmen) figured out that a rising tide of hostility to Muslims and Arabs was counterproductive to U.S. interests in global politics and oil importation. While there were many cases of prejudice and physical and verbal threats and actions, in point of fact they declined rapidly and the media took on a considerable burden of "educating" public opinion about Islam...certainly more so than any previous time. (I'm not saying there are no prejudices or problems; I'm saying that an unintended consequence has been a liberalizing education in the public sphere.)

And yet, a year later on the road again, two events seemed to mark the perversion of that "education." At a Wyoming gas station, a clerk, noting I was from Chicago, asked if I lived near the "twin towers." Later, driving through the desperate gulch of 30-50 year old motels in a Wyoming town on the interstate, you couldn't miss the presence of U. S. flags on all motels and the tell-tale nativist racism of signs claiming "American Owned" on

many motel signs. We stayed at one without such a sign and registered with a sari-clad woman. Later, looking out the window at her grandchildren playing in the parking lot, next to the Chicano guys grilling *carne asada* on a little hibachi next to their pickup truck, I wondered how the kids fared in the local school system.

But in analyzing image culture, you can't just talk about what images exist, you have to also discuss which ones are absent. For a brief period in late September and early October, there was a flurry of reports and analyses using the theme of "why do they hate us?" During this brief window, images of angry protesters in Pakistan, Iran, Saudi Arabia, etc. appeared as the only conceivable visual presentation of the theme. During this limited window, there was actually some presentation of the facts of U.S. imperialism, of U.S. support for dictators and military regimes around the world and how the government works in the interests of transnational corporations. But the discussion rapidly disappeared, and the images were not present. Americans don't want to think about these issues which are best represented by the effects: dead and maimed victims of military actions, starving children, etc. Instead we ended up with images of Afghanistan: women shedding their burkas and reading books, markets selling posters and music from Bollywood films, gun-toting warlords in quaint local costumes meeting with formerly exiled politicians wearing western business suits.

During the Gulf War, a good friend worked for CNN in London. Her job was to download from the European satellite 6-8 hours a day of Iraqi television atrocity footage showing the results of US military bombing (the then new and famous "smart bombs" that were reported as only hitting precise military targets-- reports that were later revealed to be wildly wrong). For hours on end she had to look at dead and wounded civilians, hospitals destroyed, residential areas decimated. French tv showed a little bit of it, British tv even less. My friend had to relay it to CNN in Atlanta. None of it was seen on US television. Similarly, when the war ended days later, horrific images of the battlefield casualties, Iraqi combatants burned alive, were self censored by US media.

During the past season, television did offer a distended version of imperial images. A new show, *The Agency*, took us inside the CIA and its covert operations: assassination, destruction, military intervention. Indiana Jones updated to people in a bunker in Washington DC hovering over screens full of data, satellite images, secret spy cameras. Same story, virtual images.

